

Can My Marriage Survive an Affair?

Successfully Treating Affairs

Hope

First, let me say that there is hope.

An overwhelming percentage of people go on to a successful marriage, after an affair. Some of my clients call it “Marriage 2.0” and they have carefully, consciously created a relationship that works for them.

A Plan

There is a plan of action that works better than other plans. Yes, we tailor it to your particular situation, once we’ve assessed your needs.

Please be careful which books you read about affairs. Don’t get me wrong, they are interesting, they just don’t quite have all their facts straight. My preference is that you get the best information possible and that it is based on research by experts in the field rather than someone’s own agenda or opinion. There are some interesting opinions out there.

Yes, I do phone counseling for couples if you cannot make it in for a session, or if you live far away.

***A big mistake couples make is waiting for the problem to go away on its own.
An affair is not in that category. No excuses, no procrastination***

For an appointment, call 585.544.5342

Suggested Steps in Therapy

- A. Define “infidelity”
- B. List the steps that form the cascade towards betrayal- how to figure out when someone is on the path towards an affair (I have a handout that helps you see when someone is at risk.)
- C. List the PTSD symptoms the partner might experience after learning of the affair: hypervigilance, intrusive images of the affair, nightmares, emotional numbing,

emotional explosions, disturb sleep etc. **Note:** both partners need therapeutic support

D. There are three phases to the therapy:

1. Atonement
2. Attunement
3. Attachment

E. Relapse Prevention

Phase 1

Atonement

Couples who stayed together: talked thoroughly about the affair with one another, the betrayer's expression of remorse was essential, as was the betrayer partner listening non-defensively to the hurt partner's emotions and answering hurt partner's questions with absolute transparency.

(The strong suggestion is that the hurt partner not ask questions about types of sex during the affair, if the affair was sexual, in addition to an emotional affair. We do not want you to have to work to remove the images.)

Do not blame the hurt partner when exploring the factors that contributed to the affair.

Don't go too fast and make sure that both partners know you will be empathizing with both of them.

The therapist may need to differentiate negative emotion from criticism and contempt and teach how to express emotions without the Four Horsemen (handout).

It is premature, at this point, for the couple to talk about why the affair occurred.

(Discussing it too early may encourage the betrayer partner to blame the affair on their low marital satisfaction. This might make the hurt partner engage in self-blame. Having an affair is a choice made by the betrayer partner alone.)

The goals of this phase of therapy are openness and transparency, expressing emotions, listening to emotions, and the betrayer partner expressing remorse, which is the beginning of the betrayer partner's atonement.

Atonement not only includes verbal apology, it includes behavioral change. Only two people in the relationship, unless the couple agrees.

The couple is starting to build marriage number two for which they need honesty, transparency and witnessing each other's truths.

Verifying that the betrayer partner is now telling the truth may be required.

Transparency about location, email, texting, phones, travel- basically everything. This phase lasts for as long as the hurt partner needs it to last.

Affairs happen. ***You are not here to be judged.*** That gets in the way of successful therapy. They are, in fact, quite common. The processes involved in affairs are fairly universal and very human. We recognize that people at times betray their own morals.

Atonement is a way of returning to oneself and one's own moral home. This return involves transparency, and eventually greater understanding in phase 2.

Phase 2

Attunement

The therapist helps the couple process past incidents of failed communication.

There is a handout for that. I like handouts because you do not have to rely on your memory. If you forget what we talked about, refer to the handout.

Couples learn how to process their past failed bids for connection using the regrettable incidents handout - they can understand how the communication went wrong.

This exercise does not deal with the affair as a whole, because that overwhelms couples. It doesn't re-litigate the problem, it exclusively looks at the communication.

It is good to understand what went wrong with the communication, but not to blame. Blame gets in the way. **The goal is** to continue improving the communication so that you don't need a counselor.

We are trying to lead to more self-disclosure and vulnerability with these sessions and handouts.

Within phase 2 the therapist teaches new conflict management skills to reverse prior conflict avoidance because conflict avoidance tends to be universal for couples that have affairs.

How can you have confidence that you can be successful with conversations that involve conflict? We will teach you techniques to improve communication and how to manage your feelings so the feelings do not sabotage your skills.

Use the Gottman Rappaport handout.

First the therapist helps a couple address what they feel and need – another two handouts for you from each other regarding their issue, and to listen and validate those feelings and needs without using the Four Horsemen.

This initial step is followed by the dream within conflict exercise- and two more handouts and the compromise exercise to help couples deep in the conversation deal with gridlocked perpetual problems and arrive at a compromise.

The partners may also need help coping with diffuse physiological arousal, or flooding - another handout and how to take a break to self soothe.

The couple learns how to create and ritualize every day emotional connection with help from a handout. How to be a great listener and create a calm ritual of emotional connection.

Please note the pattern with handouts. We are communicating that we have seen this before, we know what to do and you have good reason to hope.

The skills are simple and straightforward and you are never on your own because there are handouts for each skill.

The stress reducing conversation is a handout for sharing the stresses that originate outside the relationship. The couple has a weekly ritual called the state of the union meeting that helps with taking inventory regularly, pointing out what is good in the relationship, clearing the air if the couple needs help to stop avoiding conflict.

Phase 3

Attachment

The opposite of betrayal is establishing trust, commitment, and loyalty.

Trust is based on transparency, truth, constructive conflict, processing past emotional injuries, and attunement. We continue this work and build towards re-commitment and loyalty in phase 3 through work on cherishing.

Couples also talk purposefully about what values give their lives meaning, what dreams they have for their future individually and together, and their goals for fulfilling these dreams = handout.

Rekindle passion and their sex life

Couples that talk about their sex life have more satisfying intimacy over time.

When the hurt partner feels enough trust and safety with the partner to resume a sexual relationship, the work on rekindling romance and erotic connection can begin.

The Gottsex kit is used (you can buy that directly from the Gottman Institute). It contains seven exercises. Each one facilitates a discussion between the partners that helps them tailor their sexual relationship to their own individual needs and preferences. Couples discuss topics like what kind of sexual initiation they would prefer, what kind of touch

feels best, what are the best ego sparing ways to refuse sex, and someone rituals of connection referred to a concept created by William Doherty -ways to connect in a predictable manner that they can count on feeling satisfying and loving for both of them.

Rituals of connection help couples to stay in friendship, closeness and emotional intimacy and how to appreciate one another and then how to turn towards and then how to celebrate the positive in a relationship. Again, there are handouts and support every step of the way, for those who appreciate that.

Relapse Prevention

Phase out therapy

How do you make certain that you will stay on track? Try doing the State of the Union every single week and you are significantly more likely to stay on track.

Let's be honest with one another. You will feel awful at some point in the future and lonely in the relationship at some point. These are inevitable, which is why you should plan for it.

What do you do when there's a potential situation in which it would be hard to use your new communication skills? Prepare for hard situations then you can anticipate.

Note: Some couples try to do this themselves and while that is admirable, I don't do my own brain surgery for a reason. Sometimes you need help and someone who has more expertise can navigate it quickly and skillfully, saving you heartache, frustration and time. If you would like my help in guiding you through this, let me know 585.544.5342